

MEXICAN WOLF BLUE RANGE REINTRODUCTION PROJECT¹

Management Decision Update: San Mateo AM1114

Final (Revised): October 27, 2008

DECISION OF LEAD AGENCY DIRECTORS:

Director recommendations:

AGFD Director, USDA-WS Director, and WMAT Director (acting): begin efforts to permanently remove AM1114 on October 28, making use of all available means (i.e. non-lethal and lethal). AGFD believes this is consistent with and appropriate under SOP 13.0 and its draft Clarification Memo. However, recognizing applicable jurisdictional boundaries (AM1114 is in New Mexico), AGFD will accede to final decision by NMDGF in consultation with USFWS.

USFS Regional Forester (Acting): begin efforts to permanently remove AM1114 on October 28. USFS believes this is appropriate under SOP 13.0. USFS defers to the wildlife management agencies on the methods of removal.

NMDGF Director and USFWS Regional Director: continue efforts to ground-trap or dart and translocate AM1114 for 14 days (October 28 through November 10). If subsequent depredations occur in New Mexico between October 27, 2008 and June 27, 2009 and are definitively assigned to AM1114, the USFWS Regional Director will recommend immediate issuance of a Removal Order (authorizing use of all available means), pending discussion with the NMDGF Director [Note: if a subsequent AM1114 depredation occurs in Arizona the USFWS Regional Director will discuss the Removal Order with the AGFD or WMAT Director, as appropriate to the incident location]. This decision reflects the fact that wolves continue to be lost to illegal killings, the most recent of which (October 13, 2008) was a pup born in the wild this year. The Project relies on pups-of-the-year to help achieve its population goals. We have endured a high number of cumulative removals (2003-2008), including five unlawful killings thus far in 2008. Also, AM1114 has not depredated on livestock since translocation-trapping efforts began on September 12; no further depredation was the goal all along.

Director decision: in accordance with SOP 13.0 and its draft Clarification Memo, the decision is to implement the recommendation of the jurisdictional Lead Agency (NMDGF) and USFWS.

¹The Reintroduction Project is a state- and tribally-led collaborative effort among six Lead Agencies and five Signatory Cooperators. Lead Agencies are: Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD); New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (NMDGF), USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services (WS), U.S. Forest Service (USFS), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and White Mountain Apache Tribe (WMAT). Signatory Cooperators are: Graham, Greenlee, and Navajo counties, Arizona; New Mexico Department of Agriculture; and Sierra County, New Mexico.

AMOC RECOMMENDATION:

All six Lead Agency representatives to the Project's Adaptive Management Oversight Committee (AMOC) discussed the Interagency Field Team (IFT) recommendations below in a conference call on October 21, 2008. Representatives from or surrogates on behalf of Graham County AZ, Greenlee County AZ, and Navajo County AZ also participated in the call. All three Arizona counties requested that the Lead Agencies adhere to Standard Operating Procedure 13.0 (Control of Mexican Wolves) and immediately remove San Mateo Pack AM1114 from the wild by use of all available means. After considering all available information, the AMOC Lead Agency representatives offered the following recommendations:

1. Assuming that no additional livestock depredations by AM1114 occur prior to October 27 (the date on which the current Management Decision on AM1114 expires) and that NMDGF, USDA-WS, and USFWS efforts to live-trap and translocate AM1114 continue at current or higher levels of effort through October 27:
 - a. AGFD, USDA-WS, and WMAT recommend that efforts to remove AM1114 be initiated on October 28 and that such efforts make use of all available means (i.e. non-lethal or lethal).
 - b. USFS recommends that efforts to remove AM1114 be initiated on October 28, but USFS offers no recommendation as to use of lethal means of take.
 - c. USFWS recommends that efforts to ground-trap or dart and translocate AM1114 be extended on October 28 for an additional 45 days.
 - d. NMDGF recommends that efforts to ground-trap or dart and translocate AM1114 cease on October 27.
2. If AM1114 is confirmed to have committed another livestock depredation between October 22 and June 27, 2009:
 - a. AGFD, USDA-WS, USFS, USFWS, and WMAT recommend immediate removal of AM1114 (again USFS expresses no opinion on use of lethal means).
 - b. NMDGF recommends AMOC reconsideration of the applicable circumstances before a decision is made pursuant to SOP 13.0 and its draft Clarification Memo.

IFT RECOMMENDATION:

If there have been no additional depredations by AM1114 at the conclusion of the 45-day Management Decision period that ends on October 27, 2008:

1. AGFD, USFS, and USDA-WS recommend (in order of preference): (a) modifying the September 12 Management Decision to include lethal removal, (b) attempting an immediate helicopter darting operation (note: timing of helicopter use should avoid intensive big game hunting periods) for up to two days and subsequently translocating AM1114 to the Gila Wilderness, and (c) continued ground trapping and/or darting for an additional 45 days. AGFD, USFS, and USDA-WS feel that support in the community has been lost and will continue to decline if the Management Decision is not quickly implemented. AM1114 is now associated with AF903 and they are using

two year-round cattle allotments. Thus, leaving AM1114 in that area would not provide relief from the possibility of another depredation.

2. NMDGF and WMAT recommend ceasing the current management decision. Weather conditions are not conducive to trapping for an additional 45 days because of freezing temperatures, the required use of trap monitors, and trapping in localized areas due to trap monitor utilization. Elk hunting seasons are underway and typically the number of livestock depredations decline during this period. AM1114 and AF903 are now associated with each other and have the potential to become a breeding pair next year. Helicopter capture is expensive, and NMDGF believes it is more warranted for removal of an entire pack with a chronic and consistent depredation history (i.e. Aspen Pack).
3. USFWS recommends (in order of preference): (a) attempting an immediate helicopter darting operation for up to two days (note: timing of helicopter use should avoid intensive big game hunting periods) and translocate AM1114 to Gila Wilderness, (b) Continuing ground trapping and/or darting for an additional 45 days. USFWS recognizes the need for immediate resolution to this scenario and the reduced community support identified in number 1 above. USFWS suggests that an immediate helicopter capture best balances the reduced community support and the consideration of the Directors that was identified in the September 12, 2008 management decision. In addition, helicopter capture avoids the reduced effectiveness of trapping during cold weather.

If AM114 is confirmed to have committed an additional livestock depredation prior to the end of the 45-day period or prior to June 27, 2009 (when two AM1114 depredations will have expired due to the 365-day limitation under SOP 13.0): all six IFT lead representatives recommend immediate removal of AM1114 via lethal control.

BACKGROUND

On September 10, 2008, pursuant to SOP 13.0 and the draft SOP 13.0 Clarification Memo (May 2008), the IFT unanimously recommended permanent removal of Mexican wolf AM1114 via lethal control.

In a conference call on September 11, 2008, all six AMOC Lead Agency representatives, a representative from Greenlee County, and three members of the IFT discussed the September 10 IFT recommendation regarding management action on San Mateo Pack AM1114, as a result of recent depredation incidents and other events within that pack's territory (i.e. livestock injuries inflicted by unknown wolves and one probable wolf depredation). After carefully considering all relevant information, including the draft Clarification Memo for SOP 13.0, AMOC offered the following majority and minority recommendations:

1. AGFD, USDA-WS, USFWS, and WMAT recommend immediate permanent removal of AM1114 by lethal means, to reduce risk of additional livestock depredation or injury.

2. USFS also recommends immediate permanent removal of AM1114, but expresses no preference for lethal or non-lethal means.
3. NMDGF recommends immediate live capture of AM1114 for translocation to the Gila Wilderness, New Mexico, for release in proximity to Laredo Pack AF1028. AF1028 is thought to be unpaired, and is genetically valuable (50% McBride, 25% Ghost Ranch, and 25% Aragon lineage). The genetic history of AM1114 is unknown.

On September 12, the USFWS Region 2 Director issued a Management Decision to immediately capture and translocate AM1114 into the Gila Wilderness, partially in hope of AM1114 pairing with Laredo F1028. The IFT has been acting under this Management Decision, but has not been able to capture AM1114. Therefore, per SOP 13.0, the IFT is providing a recommendation to AMOC regarding how to proceed after Day 45 of the Management Decision (October 27, 2008 is 45 days after issuance).

On October 21, the Lead Agency representatives to AMOC discussed the IFT recommendations in a conference call. Representatives from or surrogates on behalf of Graham County AZ, Greenlee County AZ, and Navajo County AZ also participated in the call. The cooperating agencies posed a number of questions to the IFT to clarify background information and the IFT recommendations. Topics discussed included the following:

1. The IFT considers AM1114 an alpha male because it is now associating with San Mateo AF903. The two travelled independently over much of the summer, including the period during which AM1114 reached and then exceeded the 3-incident response threshold in SOP 13.0. In previous recommendations (i.e. September 10 and 11, 2008), the IFT and AMOC speculated that association with AM1114 might increase the likelihood of AF903 being involved in livestock depredation. As acknowledged in the IFT recommendation herein, association of the two wolves also increases the potential for them to be a breeding pair in 2009 (if further depredation does not occur).
2. Translocating AM1114 to the Gila Wilderness NM to pair with Laredo F1028 is apparently no longer a viable option. As of October 23, IFT monitoring indicates that F1028, although still unpaired, has moved out of the Gila Wilderness and is moving more widely than in the past. If this situation continues, it could be difficult to successfully pair AM1114 with F1028. Further, if F1028 localizes where livestock are present, depredation history would contra-indicate translocating AM1114 into that area. The IFT has not identified an alternative site for translocation of AM1114, if it is captured before October 27, 2008 and F1028 has not moved back into the Gila Wilderness.
3. As of the October 21 AMOC conference call, neither NMDGF nor USFWS would be willing to cover the costs of helicopter capture of AM1114 for translocation. Other cooperators suggest that costs of helicopter capture should be weighed against the cost of ground-based effort in determining which tool to use. From September 12 through about September 26, only USDA-WS IFT members were involved in the ground-capture effort. At about Day 14, NMDGF and USFWS began to assist USDA-WS with trap monitoring.

The total cost of ground-trapping effort between September 12 and October 27 is estimated at \$17,800 (\$5600 NMDGF; \$2200 USFWS; \$10,000 USDA-WS).

4. The USFWS IFT recommendation above stated that freezing nighttime temperatures reduce live-trap effectiveness. The NMDGF AMOC representative believes that, given a proper trap set, trapping is not necessarily any less effective in freezing temperatures. Regardless, the IFT and AMOC agree that freezing temperatures trigger a requirement under SOP 14.0 (Trap Preparation and Use) for use of trap monitors, which necessitate intensive staff commitment. The NMDGF AMOC representative suggests this would limit the distribution of trapping effort and thus its potential effectiveness. Based on an expectation that the initial USDA-WS trapping efforts would be effective, the IFT did not consider these factors or the normal onset of freezing temperatures in the AM1114 use-area in September-October in their September 10 AM1114 management recommendation. Freezing temperatures are foreseeable, but obviously beyond Project control. In contrast, trap monitoring obligations under an approved SOP are an employee allocation issue that is within control of the Lead Agencies. If the resources are not available (or will not be made available) to support a Management Decision alternative, AMOC and the Directors should be apprised of, and consider, that fact before they make recommendations or a final decision.
5. NMDGF, in the IFT recommendation above, expressed an opinion that use of helicopter capture is more warranted for capture of entire packs, rather than individuals such as AM1114. NMDGF does not support resorting to and paying for an expensive helicopter capture at this time. The unsuccessful initial trapping effort, cessation of depredation, and draft SOP 13.0 Clarification Memo recognition of management flexibility are factors that prevent this situation from rising to the level of an emergency. AGFD expressed concern in the October 21 AMOC conference that, absent opposing comment, the NMDGF opinion might become an unofficial standard within the Project. AGFD does not recall “emergency” being defined as a Project response-standard, but it does believe that use of helicopter support should be based on the desired outcome and whether it is the best tool by which to achieve the desired levels of effectiveness and efficiency, rather than on the number of animals to be captured.